Jubilee of Catechists: "Catechesis, Door of Hope"
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Given that my repertoire of original thoughts is greatly lacking, I will be drawing upon several resource documents for this presentation. What may be lacking in original thought, however, may be supplemented by examples and stories of personal experience.

At the request of Pope Francis, the United States Catholic Bishops made a retreat together in January 2019. Pope Francis assigned the Preacher of the Papal Household, then Father (now Cardinal) Raniero Cantalamessa, to direct our retreat. Fr. Cantalamessa pointed out that bishops have two primary tasks, evangelization and catechesis. He noted, however, that we tend to think that catechizing someone makes the person a Christian or good Catholic. Without being first evangelized by an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ through the witness and preaching of the kerygma—namely, his passion, death, and resurrection—catechesis remains without authentic impact on the person. So, it is with all who seek to lead others to Jesus Christ through the teachings of the Catholic faith. Evangelization must take priority. Yet, we rarely if ever do one task without the other. Evangelization and catechesis go together like hand and glove. While we need a hand for the glove, we must remember that the glove it not meant for anything else but the hand. It is this

conviction of *evangelizing catechesis*, a both/and rather than either/or, that underlies our focus on *missionary transformation* and *pastoral conversion.*

Pope Leo XIV has echoed this sentiment in his encouragement and support of the Jubilee Year of Hope, began by his predecessor, and continuing to bear fruit among the People of God. In his message to the Knights of Columbus, during their recent convention, the Holy Father spoke of the Church as a "sign of hope" and the need for its members to be "tangible signs of hope." This is especially true for catechists.

Evangelization is essential to the missionary call of proclaiming the faith, involving the invitation to conversion and relationship with Jesus Christ. Catechesis proceeds from the evangelizing efforts of proclamation, witness and this two-fold invitation. Though distinct, evangelization and catechesis are necessarily dependent upon one another. The Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has articulated a vision of evangelizing catechesis, which is both Trinitarian and Christocentric, providing direction for the process of discipleship as follows:

> "At the heart of the Church's mission to all people, an evangelizing catechesis seeks to deepen a personal encounter with Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit: It proclaims the core message of the Gospel, the kerygma; it accompanies people to a response of faith and conversion to Christ; it provides a systematic exposition of God's revelation within the communion of the Catholic Church; and it sends out missionary disciples as witnesses to the good news of

salvation who promote a new vision of life, of humanity, of justice, and of human fraternity."

Through this understanding of Evangelizing Catechesis we want to highlight the four elements of missionary discipleship formation; namely, encounter, accompaniment, community and sending.

According to the *Directory for Catechesis,* promulgated in 2020 by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, the Church's missionary nature demands an ongoing process of discernment and openness to new means of transmitting the faith as inspirited by the Holy Spirit:

> The Church, which is "missionary by her very nature" (AG 2), thus keeps herself open to carry out with confidence this new stage of evangelization to which the Holy Spirit calls her. This requires the commitment and the responsibility to identify new languages with which to communicate the faith. Since there have been changes in the forms of transmission of the faith, the Church is committed to deciphering some of the signs of the times through which the Lord shows her path to take. Among these multiple signs can be recognized: the centrality of the believer and of his life experience; the considerable role of relationships and the affections; interest in that which offers true meaning; the rediscovery of that which is beautiful and lifts up the spirit. In these and other movements of contemporary culture the Church grasps the possibilities for encounter and for proclamation of the newness of the faith. This is

the linchpin of her *missionary transformation*, which drives *pastoral conversion*. [n.5]

I would like to recall a reflection provided by Archbishop Rino Fisichella, Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization at the Holy See, at the June 2024 Convocation for the Institute on the Catechism held at St. Mary's of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois. Making the point that authentic encounter is predicated on relationship, Archbishop Fisichella compared the story of St. Peter leaving everything to follow Jesus with the story of the Rich Man who walked away sad. Just after Peter returned from fishing all night, catching nothing, Jesus got aboard his boat to preach to the people on shore. After preaching, Jesus turned to Peter and instructed him to cast his nets. Archbishop Fisichella pointed out how the instruction was coming from a carpenter's son to a professional fisherman. Peter, who evidently been listening intensely to Jesus, realized that he was more than just a carpenter and does as he is instructed. After catching so many fish that others had to assist, Peter simultaneously becomes aware of Jesus' divinity and his own unworthiness. When called by Jesus to follow him, Peter leaves everything. Having allowed himself to focus on the person of Jesus, Peter has engaged in a personal encounter and been transformed. In comparison, however, the story of the Rich Man is about the lack of such personal encounter leading to transformation. The Rich Man approached Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. He is not so much looking for guidance as seeking approval, recognition. When Jesus invites him to follow, the Rich Man walked away sad. Why? Because his focus remained on himself, never realizing Jesus' true identity. Peter's focus on Jesus inspired him to act in

hope while the Rich Man's self-centered focus caused him to lack any sense of hope. The role of the evangelizing catechist is to lead others to the transforming grace of a personal encounter with the person of Jesus Christ.

In his *ANGELUS* message of 20 July 2025, Pope Leo exclaimed:

Humility is needed to offer hospitality, but also to receive it. It also takes courtesy, attentiveness and openness. In the Gospel, Martha risks missing out on some of the joy of this exchange. She is so caught up in preparing to welcome Jesus that she nearly spoils a unique moment of encounter. Martha is a generous person, but our Lord calls her to something more than generosity alone. He calls her to leave her preparations behind and to come and spend time with him.

Dear brothers and sisters, our lives can only flourish if we learn to be open to something greater than ourselves, something that brings us happiness and fulfillment. Martha complains that her sister has left her alone to serve (cf. v. 40), but Mary is completely caught up in Jesus' words. She is no less practical than her sister, nor less generous, but she recognized what was most important. That is why Jesus chides Martha. She was missing an opportunity to share in a moment that would have brought her great joy (cf. vv. 41-42).

...Every genuine encounter is free; it cannot be bought, whether it is an encounter with God, with others or with nature. We need only learn the art of hospitality, which includes both welcoming others and allowing ourselves to be welcomed. We have much to receive, not only to give.

The role of the catechist, as implied in the notion of *Evangelizing Catechesis,* necessarily involves the kerygmatic formation of people as missionary disciples of Jesus Christ. First and foremost, the catechist must be a witness, one who has encountered the person of Jesus Christ and seeks to bring others to Him. Credible witness is predicated on being ourselves, keeping before us the example of John the Baptist, readily acknowledging that we are not saviors but merely voices for the living Word of God, the Savior of the world. Such credible witness must be rooted in prayer, ongoing discernment, steeped in scripture, and drawing from sacramental grace. The catechist does not merely transmit the contents of Catholic teaching but forms the heart while educating the mind, through accompaniment and encounter. As with all the baptized, as Pope Francis exhorted us in this Jubilee Year, so the catechist is called to be a "Pilgrim of Hope." Above all, the catechist must be Christ-centered rather than ego-centered or agenda-driven. Theology, in pastoral measure, must prevail over ideology.

The Final Document from the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission," speaks of the formation for missionary discipleship. It states:

> The formation of missionary disciples begins with and is rooted in Christian Initiation. In each person's journey of faith, there is an encounter with many people, groups and small communities that have helped foster their relationship with the Lord and introduce them in the communion of the Church: parents and

family members, godparents, catechists and educators, liturgical leaders and those providing charitable services, deacons, priests and the Bishop himself. Sometimes, once the journey of Initiation is over, the bond with the community weakens, and formation becomes neglected. However, becoming missionary disciples of the Lord is not something achieved once and for all. It demands continuous conversion, growing in love "to the full measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13) and being open to the gifs of the Spirit for a living and joyful witness of faith. This is why it is important to rediscover how the Sunday Eucharist is formative for Christians…In the Mass, we experience synodality coming to life in the Church as a grace received from above…The gift of communion, mission and participation – the three cornerstones of synodality – is realized and renewed in every Eucharist. [n. 142]

The document goes on to make clear that "Formation must consequently engage all dimensions of the human person (intellectual, affective, relational and spiritual) and include concrete experiences that are appropriately accompanied." [n. 143] It adds:

Shared synodal formation for all the Baptized constitutes the horizon within which to understand and practice the specific formation required for individual ministries and vocations. For this to happen, it must be implemented as an exchange of gifts between different vocations (communion), in perspective of a service to be performed (mission) and in a style of involvement and education in

differentiated co-responsibility (participation). This request, which emerged strongly from the synodal process, often requires a demanding change of mentality and a renewed approach to bold formation contexts and processes. Above all, it implies an inner readiness to be enriched by the encounter with brothers and sisters in the faith. [n. 147]

In the first months of his pontificate, Pope Leo XIV has echoed some of the key words of the late Pope Francis; namely, accompaniment, dialogue, and encounter; all three are necessarily relational. Pope Leo XIV, drawing from his Augustinian roots and episcopal motto, exhorts us to be instruments of peace, unity, and mercy. It is through the "art of accompaniment," that we are able to meet persons where they are, heal wounds, and then teach or lead them in a spirit of hope. Meeting people where they are means that we need to get to know individuals as persons, each as someone with a particular identity, experience, and history. It is important from the onset to learn each person's story by respectful inquiry, listening attentively, and being non-judgmental. Who/What led someone to the place where the catechist is privileged to encounter that person? The catechist, as an evangelizer, must not only know the kerygma—the "story" of Jesus Christ—but know those in which he/she is serving. Each of the gospel evangelists wrote for a particular community. To be effective, each evangelist had to know and understand those within his community. Like the Church itself, the Christian initiation process is missionary by nature. There must be flexibility, taking into consideration particular conditions and situations of each person. This has

certainly been the case when celebrating the Sacraments of Christian Initiation of inmates in correctional facilities. I have had the opportunity to receive three women into the Church, two catechumens and a candidate. There can be certain challenges in such experiences, leaving profound impression on everyone involved in the process. For the process to be effective, it requires that all persons involved—inquirers, godparents, sponsors, and team—be fully engaged in the three "synodal cornerstones" of communion, mission, and participation. If relational, it must be personal. Pope Francis stresses this point in his October 2024 Encyclical Letter, Dilexit Nos ("On the Human Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ"): "It is essential to realize that our relationship to the Person of Jesus Christ is one of friendship and adoration, drawn by the love represented under the image of his heart." [#49] Earlier this year, in July, Pope Leo XIV addressed the youth gathered in Rome:

Jesus is the friend who always accompanies us in the formation of our conscience. If you truly want to encounter the Risen Lord, then listen to his word, which is the Gospel of salvation. Reflect on your way of living, and seek justice in order to build a more humane world. Serve the poor, and so bear witness to the good that we would always like to receive from our neighbors. Be united with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Adore Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, the source of eternal life. Study, work and love according to the example of Jesus, the good Teacher who always walks beside us.

[Tor Vergata Jubilee for Youth Vigil]

Given the fact that formation/education is ongoing, and conversion is a lifelong process, it is important to keep in mind that evangelization occurs throughout the entire process of Christian Initiation and beyond. Thus, we speak of evangelizing catechesis. The catechist is more than just a conduit of knowledge and information. The catechist must be, first and foremost, a disciple of Jesus Christ. Without the witness of discipleship, words will have little impact on others. It is important to not overwhelm with information overload. In his powerful Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), St. Paul VI shared the following insights:

> Jesus Himself, the Good News of God, was the very first and the greatest evangelizer. [7] As an evangelizer, Christ first of all proclaims a kingdom, the kingdom of God. [n. 8] As the kernel and center of His Good News, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God and being known by Him, of seeing Him, and of being given over to Him. [9] Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection. [n. 14] The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself. She is the community

> of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love. She is the People of God immersed in the world… [n. 15] The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Tough independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather, they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them. [20] Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. [n. 21] Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. [41]

We must keep in mind that we are engaged in a process rather than mere programming. The catechist is about mission rather than maintenance. Such a journey, a process, necessarily implies the need for growth in faith, maturity in discipleship. It is a path of faith seeking understanding. As representatives of the Church, emphasized by the Second Vatican Council as Pilgrim People of God, we must keep before us that the Church is not meant so much to be counter-cultural as to transform the culture in which it exists. The catechist, as product of cultural, is influenced by societal values of any given age. One generation does

not think better or worse than another, but each generation is conditioned by the particular values or influencers of its time in history. In the spirit of synodality, *Evangelizing Catechesis*, is meant to broaden the tent of the Church's hospitality to invite, welcome, and embrace all peoples. We are, indeed, a Church of sinners and saints, all bringing to the table our hopes and fears, wounds and healings, joys and sorrows. Throughout the process it is important to keep before us who is to be evangelized—the Community—everyone…the priest, director, lay team, staff, godparents/sponsors, inquirer/catechumen/candidate, catechists, parish, diocese, and members of the Holy See. The relational aspect of Spirit's transforming grace is especially captured in the Rites of Sending and Election, making clear how essential community is to the journey of faith. The two greatest commands are based on this relational quality of loving God with one's whole being and neighbor as oneself. The call to missionary discipleship, rooted in our baptismal call to holiness and mission, is not an ideal but mandate from Jesus for each of us, necessarily involving a personal relationship with the person of Jesus Christ.